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ABSTRACT

When the author's family spent a year in Germany, two of the children attended German schools, where they were forced to learn German for all communication. On the basis of that experience, it is suggested that classrooms employ situations similar to total immersion in language teaching. Teaching and learning for communication depend on three factors: (1) meaningful use of language, (2) understanding what words mean and how patterns operate, and (3) a feeling of success in the learner. The free learner immersed in a foreign language environment learns language in a situational context. In the classroom, if actions and picture are associated with vocabulary, listening comprehension is developed. Creative use of the language should be encouraged, as students express original sentences. Situational contexts help clarify vocabulary and grammatical structures. Use of the native language to explain structures is helpful in understanding language patterns, and helps particularly the older learner acquire the language faster. Success and a positive attitude may be generated by presenting material in short lessons, which are less discouraging and easier to master. Creative review and communication also lead to a warm atmosphere and a sense of accomplishment. (CHK)

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TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR COMMUNICATION

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Last year I was the recipient of a Fulbright lectureship to West Germany, and so the entire family spent the year in Freiburg. Our oldest son preferred to go to the French lycée, but the two younger children, Pierre then age 9 and Nathalie age 12, decided that they would rather attend German schools and learn German. Equipped with a vocabulary limited to "ja", "nein" and "Guten Tag", they courageously began classes.

Pierre was enrolled in the local school, which, because of recent efforts at centralization, was spread out across four villages: first and second grade in Buchenbach, third grade in Unteribenthal, fourth grade in Falkenstein, fifth and sixth grade in Wagensteig. The school district owned one bus which ran a complex schedule picking children up from their homes and distributing them among the schools. Knowing that Pierre would have to master the bus system, I decided not to drive him to school the first day. Rather, I asked the principal for the name and address of a boy enrolled in fourth grade — Pierre's class — and went with Pierre to pay him a visit. It was arranged that Manfred would pick Pierre up at our house, take him to the bus, and subsequently to his classroom . . . and that Manfred would see that Pierre also got back safely. The next morning at 7:15, Manfred came by and the two went out the door together. But within a minute Pierre was back: "How do you say, 'I don't understand!' in German?" And after practicing "Ich verstehe nicht!" a few times, he was off again.

From day one, Pierre was learning German for communication. A week later, he proudly announced that he could carry on a long conversation in German. "Oh?" I said. "Yes, it's easy. Someone says something and you say 'nein'. He answers 'doch' and then you say 'nein', 'doch', 'nein', 'doch' . . . It can continue a long time!"

Soon Pierre was communicating in whole sentences: "Manfred, willst du Monopoly spielen mit mich?" or the equivalent of "Do you want Monopoly with I to play?" The language was not too correct, but the message was none the less transmitted, and the two would get out the Monopoly board.

After eight months of immersion, during which time he was primarily functioning as a "free learner", that is, as a learner without formal language instruc-

tion, Pierre left Germany with a fairly decent command of the language.

The key to Pierre's success lay in the fact that he *wanted* to become a member of his peer group, and to do so he had to communicate in German. The German he used was always linked to meaningful situations. He did not memorize dialogs or run through pattern drills. Every sentence he said, irrespective of its grammatical accuracy, was formulated to convey a message. And if the message he wished to communicate was misinterpreted, he would try again until the others understood.

In our foreign language classrooms we cannot replicate the conditions under which Pierre learned German. He was one outsider trying to break the language code of the surrounding community. Our students do not need to learn French or German or Spanish or Italian to talk to each other: they can use English. As teachers, we therefore must set up an artificial environment in which students can master a second language. This classroom effort may be described as "teaching and learning for communication" and is quite different from immersion in another culture which permits direct "learning for communication".

This morning we will focus our attention on "teaching and learning for communication". How can we improve our classrooms so that more students learn to communicate in the language they are studying? What lessons can we derive from the experiences of the free learner? What do recent findings in learning theory seem to indicate? What good things are happening in our classrooms?

It appears that teaching and learning for communication are dependent on three factors:

1. the meaningful use of language;
2. an understanding of what words mean and how patterns operate; and
3. a feeling of success generated in the learner.

Let us look at each of these factors in greater detail in order to derive specific suggestions for improving our foreign language programs.

1. The Meaningful Use of Language

In a review article on the topic of "Learning Theory for the Classroom Teacher", which appeared in the 1974 ACTFL Review of Language Education,

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John Carroll stresses the importance of meaning in language learning, and evokes the general principle that "a meaning that is richly endowed with concrete situational content is more likely to be learned and attached to the corresponding sound pattern than one that is abstract or endowed with little situational content".¹

When the free learner is immersed in a foreign language environment, the utterances to which he or she reacts most rapidly are those with the greatest degree of situational content — commands such as "Come here!" and "Don't do that!" or offers such as "Would you like a piece of candy?" When watching television in Germany, for instance, our son Pierre learned to understand the commentary accompanying the soccer games much more readily than the weather reports, because the action of a sports telecast provided a much stronger context than did the weather map.

The free learner similarly uses the new language to convey messages which he or she considers to be important, that is, meaningful. Our family had only been in Germany for three weeks when Mother's Day arrived. Pierre had seen specially decorated cakes at the bakery, and offered to go buy one as a surprise for the others. I gave him enough money and before long he was back with the cake. Knowing that no one in the bakery spoke English, I asked Pierre how he had managed. "Oh," he replied, "it was easy. I said 'Dein Kuchen, da!' and the lady wrapped it up for me." Now, no well-mannered German child would simply walk into a store and point at a cake, using the familiar form "Your cake, there". But the saleslady knew that Pierre was American and she was glad to sell her products. The message had been conveyed.

In the classroom, there are many ways to increase the meaningfulness of the language we are teaching. Let us look at some of them.

First, we should try to provide meaningful practice in listening comprehension. The more students listen to the foreign language, without responding verbally, the more readily they begin to develop a feeling for what the language sounds like and what words mean. For example, students learn the names of parts of the body more readily and retain them longer if they play "Simon Says" than if they spend an equivalent period of time trying to repeat the new vocabulary. James Asher has obtained excellent initial results by having students respond physically to spoken commands: stand up, sit down, take the red pen and place it next to the blue book, etc.² Harris Winitz and James Reeds have developed a beginning German program where students match spoken sentences with the

appropriate pictures while avoiding oral responses. This intensive listening practice has produced students with a stronger command of spoken German than those who were engaged in the more traditional program where they responded orally from the outset.³ It should be noted that these various examples of listening comprehension training all require some sort of active response from the students — that is, the students are expected to assign a meaning to the statements they hear, each time that they hear them. When students are asked to memorize a brief dialog, on the other hand, the meaning which is explained at the outset often evaporates during the many repetitions so that the weaker students sometimes are not sure of what they are saying. Moreover, in speaking and repeating from the outset, students receive much more practice listening to their classmates' inaccurate renderings of the foreign language than they do listening to authentic models. Intensive listening comprehension practice lets students develop a true sensitivity to the new language.

Second, we should encourage a *creative* use of the new language once the students are speaking and writing. Let us imagine a beginning German class in which the students are to learn the third person singular and plural endings of regular verbs. The teacher might use a map of Germany, and first teach the names of cities, such as Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich. Then the teacher might introduce some imaginary young people who live in these cities: Franz and Karl who live in Frankfurt, Heidi and Clara who live in Berlin, and Peter and Inge who live in Munich. Once the students have practiced sentences like "Karl wohnt in Frankfurt." and "Heidi und Clara wohnen in Berlin.", they will be able to answer the question "Wo wohnt Peter?" with "Peter wohnt in München."... thus producing an original German sentence, readily understandable by speakers of German, a sentence furthermore that they themselves have never heard but which they were able to generate. As students generate new sentences, they are beginning to use the language creatively, much in the way that the free learner produces original sentences. The context we have just described could be expanded by dividing the classroom into three or four "cities" and then talking about where the various students in the class live: "Wo wohnt Patricia?" "Sie wohnt in Stuttgart." This approach to language learning differs somewhat from the audio-lingual approach in that students are not expected to memorize sentences, but rather to use them to express meaningful and original messages.

Third, we should try to present new structures in a

situational context which clarifies their usage. Most textbooks begin the presentation of a new grammatical pattern through a dialogue, a reading, or a set of questions which incorporate the various aspects of the pattern under study. However, frequently this presentation does not help the student remember the various aspects of the pattern. Take, for example, the case of the partitive article in French: the students must learn the affirmative and negative forms of the partitive, as well as its uses. How might one present this structure in a series of meaningful contexts? Here is one possibility.

Scene One: A teenage student has friends over to the house. They are hungry and go to the refrigerator. Upon opening it they find a great selection of foods: meat, cheese, tomato salad, lemon soda, cake . . . "Il y a de la viande, du fromage, de la salade de tomates, de la limonade, du gâteau. . ." In this situation, the students are introduced to the affirmative partitive article: *du* and *de la*.

Scene Two: The young people sit down to eat and talk about their preferences: "I like cheese." "I prefer meat." "J'aime le fromage." "Je préfère la viande."

Here the students learn to use the definite article to introduce nouns used in a general sense, especially after verbs like *aimer* and *préférer*.

Scene Three: The young people have all gone home. The kitchen is empty. Mother enters and opens the refrigerator to discover that there is no more meat, no more cheese, no more tomato salad, no more lemon soda, no more cake. "Il n'y a plus de viande, plus de fromage, plus de salade de tomates, plus de limonade, plus de gâteau. Les enfants ont tout mangé!"

In this final scene the students are introduced to the negative form of the partitive. The sequence of the three situational presentations provides a rich and meaningful context which will help the students remember the new grammatical pattern.⁴

A fourth way to increase the relevance of the language we are teaching is to encourage the students to practice these structures in similar meaningful situations. One of the reasons that students had difficulties with the "grammar-translation" approach to a foreign language was that they were working with highly artificial sentences of the "plume de tante" variety. However, the pattern drills of the audio-lingual approach made equally strenuous demands on the students. Open almost any textbook in your department library and choose an exercise at random. Read the sentences in sequence and imagine yourself in the place of the average student in your classes. Here is the English equivalent of such an

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exercise. The students are to replace the direct object with a pronoun.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Do you see the river? | Yes, I see it. |
| Are you giving back the change? | Yes, I am giving it back. |
| Are you finishing your homework? | Yes, I am finishing it. |
| Are you choosing your clothes? | Yes, I am choosing them. |

The good student will probably be able to jump mentally from rivers to change to homework to clothes. The poorer student will give up trying to understand what is going on, and will simply think of the exercise as the one with "it" and "them".

Contextual or situational exercises provide a framework within which the individual cues are provided. For instance, in practicing the direct object pronouns, the teacher could point out real and imaginary objects. The students answer whether they can really see them or not.

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Do you see the window? | Yes, I see it. |
| Do you see the books? | Yes, I see them. |
| Do you see the horse? | No, I don't see it. |

Role-play situations can also be used to provide a meaningful context for exercises. For instance, imagine that Paul is leaving for vacation. He is taking lightweight clothing and sports equipment, but nothing to remind him of school.

| | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Is Paul taking his tennis racquet? | Yes, he's taking it. |
| Is he taking his history books? | No, he's not taking them. |
| And his swimming suit? | Yes, he's taking it. |

To perform appropriately in a situational exercise, students must understand what is being said. Thus they end up using the language for communication while at the same time developing a mastery of new structures and vocabulary items. Furthermore, the meaningful practice makes it more likely that they will remember the structures they have been working with.

As a fifth factor in teaching and learning for communication, we must allow the students the opportunity to express their own ideas. Through frequent self-expression, the free learner gradually acquires an acceptable command of the language of the community in which he or she is immersed. The prime characteristic of this self-expression is the learner's desire to communicate, that is, there is a

high affective component in this aspect of his or her language learning. The second characteristic is that the listener will usually tolerate mistakes in vocabulary and structure as long as the message is comprehensible. To encourage a similar type of activity in the classroom, the teacher must first create situations in which the students wish to express themselves, and then tolerate inaccuracies unless these mistakes are so grave as to make comprehension impossible.

The application of values clarification techniques to the teaching of foreign languages has been helping teachers enhance the effectiveness of self-expression activities. Let us take an example as elementary as the teaching of colors. The names of the colors are easily presented and practiced in situational context: the colors of books, or of visuals, or of items of clothing. As a self-expression exercise, then, the students can be encouraged to give their own personal reactions to colors. For instance the class can be divided into groups of four. The first person in each group asks the others: "What color do you think of when you are hungry?" The second one is to find out what color his or her classmates think of when they are sleepy, the third which color is associated with anxiety, and the fourth happiness. Within each group, every student asks three questions and answers three questions. Then the class results can be tabulated at the board. Not only will the students see emerging patterns, plus a wide range of differences, in response to each question, but they will be personally involved in the activity for they are expressing their own thoughts.

In addition to the group interview technique just described, values clarification uses many other ways of encouraging students to express themselves. One such technique is called "rank order", in which students arrange a set of options by order of preference. For example:

Imagine you can do one of the following things on a Saturday night —

- go to a football game
- watch a TV movie
- go to a dance
- read a book

Which one would you most want to do? What is your second choice? your third choice? your last choice?

Another values clarification technique is the continuum. The teacher draws a long horizontal line across the blackboard or on the overhead. Diametrically opposed positions are assigned to each end of the line. For example, at one end of the line the teacher might write: "I love pizza!" At the other end

would be written: "I hate pizza!" One at a time, students come to the front of the class and place their initials at a spot on the line which corresponds to their personal reaction.

I love JP PV I hate
pizza! | | pizza!

Students who wish to explain their position may be encouraged to do so.⁵

The meaningful use of language is definitely the most important factor in teaching and learning for communication. As we have just seen, there are several ways in which the teacher can stimulate effective language learning: by providing meaningful practice in listening comprehension, by encouraging the creative use of language from the outset, by presenting new structures in a situational context which clarifies their usage, by letting students practice these new structures in similar meaningful contexts, and finally by allowing students the opportunity to express their own feelings and ideas.

2. An Understanding of What Words Mean and How Patterns Operate

What should be the role of formal language instruction in teaching and learning for communication? The general guideline which common sense suggests is to provide the students with as much explanation as they request and are able to assimilate.

The young free learner, that is, the elementary school student, will tend to make heavy use of a bilingual resource person who speaks both the target language and the child's native language. Translation activity will go in both directions: "How do you say, 'Do you want to play football?'" where the child wants to express a native-language concept in the target language. And "What did Peter just say?" or "What does this homework question mean?" when the child does not quite understand a statement in the target language.

In the case of our son Pierre the acquisition of German was definitely accelerated because on the one hand his classroom teacher knew enough English to give brief explanations about what was happening in school, and because at home he could get an English translation of word problems in math, of readings in science and history, and of selections assigned for his German class. Another American child whom we met and who was similarly immersed in elementary school near Freiburg had much more difficulty in acquiring German, for his teacher knew almost no English and his parents knew almost no German.

For the free learner, the use of the native language is never an end in itself, but a means to improving one's ability to communicate in the target language. Pierre, for example, often prepared short stories at home by having me read them bilingually: a sentence in German and then the translation of that sentence into English. But at school the story was discussed entirely in German.⁶ Similarly, Pierre often asked me in English for the German equivalents of certain words and expressions, but then he used these new vocabulary items in talking with his German friends.

Let us turn our attention now to the student who learns a foreign language in an American school. The role of English in the foreign language classroom has never been exhaustively investigated. It is clear, of course, that if the teacher speaks primarily English and uses the foreign language only for doing exercises, the students will have little experience in listening comprehension and self-expression. Moreover, they will get the idea that the foreign language is but a curious "code" and that for important things the native language is required. Similarly, if most classroom exercises consist of translation, the students will not develop a feeling for the target language as a means of communication. Since for most students, the classroom is their only opportunity for contact with the foreign language, it is best to use that foreign language as much as possible in class. But it may also be that a quick English equivalent of a difficult expression might clear up a misunderstanding much more readily than a lengthy round-about explanation in the target language. It might be helpful if the student text were to contain English explanations of vocabulary items and new structures which would be used primarily for out-of-class reference. And maybe bilingual materials provide an economical way of teaching reading and listening comprehension. As long as English is introduced only as a means to an end, which is communication, the students themselves are probably the best judges as to its usefulness for them.

A second area which merits some attention is the role of grammar instruction. For Pierre, who was nine, formal grammar instruction consisted simply of a few corrections of his more blatant errors. For instance, early during his stay in Germany, I pointed out the difference between "ich" which corresponds to "I" and is the subject of the sentence, and the object pronouns "mir", which is always used after "mit" (as in "mit mir", with me) and "mich" which is always used after "für" (as in "für mich", for me). He was not interested in hearing about the dative and the accusative cases.

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However, Nathalie, who was twelve and in the seventh grade, reacted quite differently to her position as a free learner in Germany. Like her younger brother, she conversed as best she could with the two girls in the neighborhood who were in her class in school, and she too asked for English explanations of her homework and for German equivalents of things she wanted to say. But after a couple of weeks she requested more formal instruction. We hired a regular tutor who explained German grammar to her in a highly traditional way. She studied gender and cases, weak and strong adjective endings, verb conjugations, word order, etc., etc. Language acquisition for her became easier when she could see the relationships among the various elements of the sentence and when she began to understand how the German language works. The grammar was not an end in itself, but rather a means of improving her ability to communicate directly in German.

Nathalie's experiences as a free learner corroborate one of Carroll's findings as reported in the 1974 ACTFL Review referred to earlier. Students at the secondary school level or higher learn a language more rapidly if they understand how it works. Carroll suggests, in fact, that instructional materials should "provide descriptions and analyses of *how* the foreign language is put together" and that in presenting new structures, the instructional materials should "emphasize similarities and contrasts of forms and meanings, with an ample supply of examples and illustrations so that the student can work out the application of concepts and rules for himself."⁷ Thus it would seem that a program concentrating on teaching and learning for communication would contain both inductive learning sequences (where students derive grammatical rules for themselves) and deductive sequences (where these same rules are succinctly explained). Whether these explanations are best given in English or in the target language will depend on the learning preferences of the students. One solution might be to present as much of the grammar and vocabulary as possible in the target language, but to select a textbook which contains explanations and equivalents in English. In this way, students who prefer having access to English explanations can study from the textbook on their own.

3. *A Feeling of Success Generated in the Learner*

Trying to communicate in a strange language can be a frustrating experience for a young person. For an adult also, for that matter. The successful learner is the one who perseveres, who continues to make the effort to understand the new language and to express

himself, even when encountering difficulties. For the free learner, motivation is constantly high, for he or she is step by step entering a new cultural group. Each time others respond, the free learner is reassured that progress is being made.

The classroom student has many fewer opportunities to try out the new language. Teaching and learning for communication are successful when the students themselves are aware of their progress. Initial motivation, that is, motivation at the beginning of a course, is not a very accurate predictor of success in language acquisition. However, student motivation at the end of a course correlates very highly with grades received. In other words, students who do well in a course are motivated to persevere.

In order to maintain high motivation, a foreign language class should be so structured that all students experience success. This means that new material should be introduced in small segments in order that all students can assimilate it. For instance, in teaching French it is often counterproductive to introduce the imperfect tense in one large chunk: a dialog or reading containing many examples of the imperfect; then a grammar section describing its forms and uses, and finally a sequence of several exercises. For most students, it would be more effective first to introduce the forms of the imperfect in a mini-lesson (short dialog or story; description of the forms; several exercises practicing the forms). A second mini-lesson might contrast the imperfect and the passé composé in terms of specific past actions (passé composé) and background events or conditions (imperfect). Then a third mini-lesson would contrast the use of the imperfect for habitual or repeated actions and the passé composé for actions that happened only once. Finally the various aspects of the imperfect would be pulled together in a recapitulation.⁸

By mastering complex structures in small pieces, even the slower learners will be able to experience a degree of success. Once students have achieved control of the imperfect tense through such a carefully controlled presentation, they will feel more confident in using the new structure in free communication activities.

It is not enough, however, to organize a careful sequential presentation of new grammar and new vocabulary and expect students to remember all they have been taught. The free learner is constantly in a position to review previously learned material, for he or she is in frequent and regular contact with the new language. The classroom learner, on the other hand, exposed only to 45 minutes of language five times a

week — at best — will forget vocabulary and structures readily. Therefore, in teaching and learning for communication, it is essential to build in review activities. It is particularly important to review structures and vocabulary which form the basis of new material to be taught. For instance, regular adjective forms should be reviewed before teaching the comparative and superlative constructions. Auxiliary verbs should be practiced before presenting the compound tenses. Similarly, the classroom learner is likely to forget a good portion of the new language over summer vacation, for during three months he or she has most probably lost contact with that language. The effective language program is one which builds in creative review at the beginning of each school year. This review can take the form of communication activities designed to get the students to meet each other, thus creating a warm class ambiance and a positive attitude toward language acquisition at the same time.

Conclusion

Students who begin communicating in a second language are indeed mastering that language. The language has become a tool in their hands, a tool that lets them understand persons of a second linguistic community and that lets them express themselves when among members of that community. The second language is no longer an abstract "subject" to be studied in school, but has become a living means of communication.

For teachers, the language program built around the principles of teaching and learning for communication has two sizeable benefits. First of all, we can feel the progress our students are making when we hear them using the language creatively in class. And secondly, we will find our language enrollments increasing, for students are quick to sign up for a course that builds their self-confidence and encourages the exchange of ideas. Nothing succeeds like success, and in language courses, success is equated with communication.

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Footnotes

¹John B. Carroll, "Learning theory for the classroom teacher," in Gilbert A. Jarvis, Editor, *The Challenge of Communication* ACTFL Review of Foreign Language Education, Volume 6, (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1974), p. 136. Other references to Carroll are from this same

article.

²Cf. James J. Asher, "The Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning," *Modern Language Journal*, 53 (1969): 3-17.

³Cf. Harris Winitz and James Reeds, "Rapid acquisition of a foreign language (German) by the avoidance of speaking," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11 (1973), 295-317.

⁴This sequential development of the partitive forms the basis of Modules 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 in Jean-Paul Valette and Rebecca M. Valette, *French for Mastery: Book One* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1975).

⁵Many more ideas about how to develop oral self-expression through the use of human dynamics techniques may be found in V. Wilson and B. Wattenmaker, *Real Communication in Foreign Language and Real Communication in Spanish*, and P. H. Stoller, J. T. Lock, V. Wilson and B. Wattenmaker, *Real Communication in French*, both available from the Adirondack Mountain Humanistic Education Center, Upper Jay, New York 12987.

⁶At a more advanced level, the bilingual approach to language learning forms the basis of Simon Belasco, *Reading College French* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

⁷Carroll, pp. 144, 145.

⁸For an example of this type of approach, cf. Chapter Four in Jean-Paul Valette and Rebecca M. Valette, *French for Mastery: Book Two* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1975).